

“The Church that Lives”

Introduction: While it’s probably not the most uplifting way to begin an Easter Sunday sermon, it is not divulging a secret to observe that in the western world, the church, at least in terms of numbers, has been in a period of decline. There are a wide variety of reasons for this decline. Some have left because the church, as they’ve experienced it, seems irrelevant to their daily life. Others have left because they believe that what the church teaches fails to match up with a modern, scientific world view. Still others have left, or haven’t even considered coming, because they have been disappointed with the leadership of the church, on a variety of levels, unable to see it as trustworthy. And maybe the most fascinating reason for leaving is expressed by a group dubbed by George Barna in his research a couple of years ago as the “revolutionaries.” They are leaving churches because they say they want *more* of God in their life, a richer experience of God that they have been unable to find in the institutional church. One woman even wrote a book back in 2014 entitled *How to Be a Christian without Going to Church: The Unofficial Guide to Alternative Forms of Christian Community* (Kelly Bean). If I could add a sub, sub-title to this book, it might be: How to Worship God While Drinking Coffee at Starbucks!

Now I certainly don’t mean to make light of the struggles many are having today with the church. Some Sunday mornings I, too, just want to go and have coffee at Starbucks! More to the point, each of these reasons, as well as many others, prompt me to ask, and should prompt the church to ask: How are we doing as a church? To what degree have we contributed to the conditions that tempt some to want to hit “eject” when it comes to the local church? In particular, as a church, are we living out the vision Jesus has for our worship, community, and mission?

Now here comes the good, or at least, the hopeful news. No matter how dark things may have gotten or seem to be getting for the church, they are nowhere near in as dark a state as that described in John 20:19. There, on the evening of the day Jesus rose, we meet a motley crew of eleven disciples (if you include Thomas, cf. v. 26). These guys, who for all intents and purposes made up what was the infant church, were hiding behind locked doors. They had spent the better part of the last three years being taught and mentored by Jesus, but the events of his trial and crucifixion had thrown them for a loop and they had all abandoned him, despite brave promises to the contrary. Now that Jesus had been put to death, they figured that the Jewish religious leaders would begin to pick them off too. Whether out of fear, or simply chauvinism or jealousy, they refused to believe the news that some of the women in their group had brought about Jesus being alive again. They were the furthest thing from a healthy church that you could imagine. If a poll had been taken, they would have been voted the “most unlikely to start a new religion.” Worship, why bother? Community, what for? Mission, impossible!

And yet, what we’ll see this morning is that the God of grace is living and active in the church that was his idea, from the very beginning, beleaguered that it might at times be. In fact, the church that began with 11 shell-shocked disciples grew to well over 3 million in just a few centuries, and to 2 billion in the world today. Along the way, the church had a profound impact on our civilized society, ranging from the liberation of women and slaves, to the humanization of children, to the creation of hospitals to care for the sick, not to mention its influence on art, architecture, and science. How did such transformation happen? What moved this group from a motley crew to a missional community? It came out of the two-fold

pronouncement of peace made by the risen Jesus, without whom the church would never have begun, nor can it continue to live. In fact, the very best piece of evidence for the reality of the resurrection is the existence of the church! Without the risen Jesus, the infant church would have become still-born. So how did he bring the church from death to life? He simply, but profoundly, called the church to first receive his peace, and then to extend it.

I. “Peace be with you!” - Receiving what Jesus Brings

A. Now it is amazing enough to think about how Jesus somehow passed through a locked door without either knocking or picking the lock. The best we can do is chalk it up to what it means to have a resurrection body, one that is remarkably different from our human frame, yet in other ways still the same. But more amazing to me is that when he did appear to his disciples, he didn't chew them out as chumps who had failed to stick with him. Nor did he begin with that very tempting phrase, “I told you so.” Instead, he greeted them with the words, “Peace be with you.” The word “peace” translates the word “shalom.” To be sure, it was the conventional Jewish greeting of the day. But Jesus was saying much more than the first century equivalent of “what's up?”

B. Peace, as Jesus used the word in his ministry, and as the NT writers use the word, has to do with a state of overall well-being. Jesus, he told his disciples in an earlier discussion, would bring a kind of peace that the world cannot offer (Jn. 14:27; 16:33). It is a peace that reconciles and brings healing to our brokenness, our brokenness with God, with one-another, with ourselves, and with creation. It is a peace that is a compliment to his last word on the cross: “It is finished.” It's not something we can earn; it's only something we can receive. It's why Jesus went on to show his disciples the marks of his crucifixion. His death was unlike any other death. It was a death that promised to bring new life, and it could actually do that because he was not still dead, but alive. It was an objective truth - Jesus was bringing forgiveness and reconciliation and healing - to these very dispirited and broken men. And it was a subjective experience - it turned their fear to joy.

This is where life begins for the church that wants to live. It begins by acknowledging our brokenness and receiving the peace that Jesus has come to bring. Here we like to call it the “hospitality” of Jesus, as it points us to the table which reminds us of his death and his invitation to come and dine there to allow him to serve us, to feast on him, to receive his healing grace, and to be joined with others in community to walk the life of faith.

II. “Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.” - Extending what we've received.

A. But that's not all. Jesus repeats his greeting of peace, and then calls the church to extend what it has received: “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.” The church, in other words, is not to live for itself; it is to live for those outside of itself, to be the means through which Jesus continues to bring healing to the brokenness in the world. It begins with the proclamation of forgiveness but doesn't end there. As Paul reminds the church in a place called Colossae: “For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in [Jesus], and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross” (Col. 1:19-20). We are to be involved, in other words, in the restoration and healing of all creation, working toward reconciliation and justice in all facets of life, from our personal relations, to race relations, to international relations.

B. This is a high and holy calling! How can we begin to carry it out? Two things Jesus says are helpful here. First, “As the Father has sent me . . .” How was Jesus sent? Jesus came, not in disguise, nor as a high official but as one of us. This means, I think, that we need to guard against either hiding or withdrawing from the world on the one hand, or thinking of ourselves as better than the world on the other hand. Instead, we must be willing to roll up our sleeves and get involved in the seeking the justice and the peace of Jesus. [Illus: Urban Mosaic, Mexico City]

B. Second, “Receive the Holy Spirit . . .” As Jesus operated in the power of the Holy Spirit, which filled him at his baptism, so must we. Have you ever been given a job, or a promotion, that you wondered how on earth you were going to accomplish? If you have the courage to ask, hopefully the response would be something like, “Don’t worry, we’ll support you. You’ll have the full resources of the company behind you!” That’s what Jesus promises when he breathes on his disciples. It’s a promise of the gift of the Holy Spirit, God’s empowering presence, that Jesus would pour out in a few short months on the day known as Pentecost.

Illustration: I remember as clear as day the evening Jim Sullivan, then chairman of this church’s search committee, called me at our home twenty-four years ago to offer me this job. I said, “yes, absolutely,” and then sank back down in bed next to Rama and thought, “How in the world am I going to carry this call out?!” All of a sudden it seemed overwhelming. What came to mind was a verse that sustained me then and has many times since. It’s a verse that speaks to the “full resources of the company” that God promised would stand behind a man named Zerubbabel, who God had called to lead the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem when the exiles began returning in around 450 BC: “This is the word of the LORD to Zerubbabel: ‘Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit,’ says the LORD Almighty” (Zech. 4:6).

This same Spirit that accompanied and empowered Zerubbabel, this same Spirit that accompanied and empowered Jesus, is the same Spirit that Jesus promises will be with us, guiding us, directing, us, and empowering us, as we seek to reveal the healing he brings to a broken and disoriented world.

Receiving the peace of the risen Jesus and extending what we’ve received. This certainly isn’t meant to sound like a pat or magic formula. But it might help us assess whether we are living out of the vision Jesus has for our worship, community, and mission, a vision that is meant to be life giving to others, as well as ourselves. It certainly made up the dynamics that transformed that first motley crew into a living and loving missional community. So perhaps, as we begin to live out this two-fold direction of peace, many of the reasons people have for leaving the church, or for being uninterested in it, might just begin to fade.